



# *Nature in the City News*

## 2024-2025 School Year



**23<sup>rd</sup> Year**

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*Thank You to Our Sponsors and Partners!*

**A hands-on/minds-on program by**



**Baltimore Woods  
Nature Center**  
*Nature in your hands*

## ***Exploring Nature and Science in Syracuse in Every Season***



## Bringing Classroom Lessons to Life

*By Whitney Lash-Marshall, Executive Director*

What an amazing school year you helped provide through the Baltimore Woods *Nature in the City* program! From September to June, your support made it possible for three, one-hour lessons to be delivered to every K-5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom across all 22 elementary schools in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD). *That is more than 1,100 hands-on/minds-on lessons inspiring 8,260 students to explore science through nature right where they live, learn, and play!*

Making sure each student gets to experience this program does more than directly support their science curriculum. Through engaging STEM games and outdoor experiences with real scientific tools, they also begin to see the world around them in new ways and become more comfortable out in nature. One of the best examples of this is when we bring in live aquatic insects to third-grade classrooms. During this lesson about the living environment, many students start off quite afraid of the “creepy crawlies” we’ve brought in, but with gentle reassurance and time to observe and ask questions about really unique creatures, fear is transformed into wonder and perspectives begin to change.



A few weeks later, those same students get to go on a field trip to a local park for a stream exploration to catch similar creatures themselves. This spring at Elmwood Park, one student referred to each creature she caught as a “friend,” unknowingly helping her peers feel brave enough to step into the stream and take their first chance with the net. On another trip, a group of students from Delaware Elementary caught a crayfish and affectionately named it “Bob,” pointing out what they had learned about its body adaptations from raising them in the classroom to our educators. It was the perfect chance for students, teachers, and the *Nature in the City* team to work together and bring the classroom to life in a City Park making observations together!

Thank you for making these - and so many other - moments possible for students across Syracuse. You provide opportunities to engage in science in new ways through local nature and physical activity, help improve access to the outdoors, and inspire even skeptical students to have “the best day ever!” by the end of the lesson. We’re looking forward to kicking off another year of exploration with you and *Nature in the City* in September!

*Whitney B. Lash-Marshall*

## What is the most beneficial part of the program for students?



**“Having a new face come in to talk about nature with them and bringing hands-on activities for the students to see in real time instead of textbooks or videos. It brings nature to life and brings them closer to nature.”**

*-1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, Dr. Weeks Elementary School*

**“Being able to explore content that they otherwise wouldn’t be able to see/learn as well as make connections to what they’ve previously learned or are learning.”**

*-4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, McKinley-Brighton Elementary School*







## New Perspectives On Nature

*By Katie Robideau, School Programs Manager*

**Just like that, the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of *Nature in the City* comes to a close!** As we wrap up another wonderful year, we extend our thanks to everyone who makes this program possible. Your continued support allows us to bring meaningful, hands-on nature experiences to students, both in their classrooms and beyond the school walls.

Throughout the year, we've shared countless memorable moments with K–5 students across the Syracuse City School District. From the excitement in the hallways as students eagerly ask, “Are you coming to our classroom today?” to joyful shouts of “Hey, it’s *Nature in the City!*” it’s clear how much this program means to them. One moment that stands out to me was in a visit to a second-grade classroom during their winter lesson, “Breakfast for Birds.” As students gathered around asking questions, one of them couldn’t contain their excitement and exclaimed, “*I am about to explode with joy!*” It’s moments like these that remind me of our impact.

Each year, we check in with teachers to hear how *Nature in the City* (NITC) supports their students. This year, a third-grade special education teacher from Franklin Elementary School shared: “*The most beneficial part of NITC for my students is the opportunity for sensory engagement and hands-on learning. Many of my students thrive in environments where they can touch, see, hear, and explore nature directly. These experiences help improve their focus, reduce anxiety, and support the development of social and communication skills in a natural, calming setting. Nature in the City provides inclusive, accessible outdoor learning that meets the diverse needs of my students...*”

As we reflect on the year, we celebrate the wonder, discovery, and connection that *Nature in the City* fosters and we can’t wait to see what next year brings. Here’s to more science adventures, nature explorations, and maybe even a few more students exploding with joy,

*Katie Robideau*



“Students are able to connect what we do in the classroom with the activities from *Nature in the City*. They are so excited for our *Nature in the City* visits.”

*-Kindergarten teacher, Meachem Elementary School*

## Teacher Feedback on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Year of *Nature in the City*

*Each spring, we conduct a feedback survey of participating K-5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. This year, we had 99 teachers respond to the survey, representing every grade level across 20 out of 22 schools.*

**100%** of teachers indicated that the *Nature in the City* program enhanced and enriched their classroom instruction.

**97%** of teachers found that *Nature in the City* visits increased student understanding of the science standards/topics.

**95%** of teachers found students making connections between *Nature in the City* and FOSS material they were learning in class.

**96%** of teachers feel their students show an increased interest in the natural world as a result of our program.

**95%** of teachers agreed that all three *Nature in the City* lessons directly supported their science curriculum.

“I LOVE this program! It is so beneficial to students and helpful for teachers!”

*-3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, Ed Smith Pre-K-8 School*



# Stories from the Classroom



## Journey of a Seed

By Bailey Whiffen, Environmental Educator

This year we introduced a new first grade lesson, Journey of a Seed, which taught students about native seeds in Central New York and how they move around in the environment or disperse! In its first year it became very popular with both students and our education team. Students were able to learn about a variety of different types of seeds that they may find around Syracuse such as burdock, maple seeds, bitternut hickories, and many more. The students loved touching and smelling the different types of seeds and exploring the different ways they disperse. Once they learned about the different types of seeds, we grabbed our magnifying glasses and went outside to explore in their own school yard to see what we could find! They loved using the magnifying glasses to get up close to the different flowers, seeds, and sometimes even bugs they found right outside their school!



**"So many think nature is this far away thing, but through *Nature in the City* we get to explore nature right in their schoolyard connecting students more to the natural world that is all around us every single day." – Bailey**



## Snowflake Bentley

By Anna Stunkel, Environmental Educator

With our warming winters, sometimes it can be a challenge to see snowflake shapes during this winter lesson where we explore the science behind snow. Even when it isn't snowing, we can enjoy looking at quartz crystals, small clumps of snow from the ground, and beautiful snowflake photographs. It's always really special when we have the chance to enjoy a snowy day, though! There was one particular day this past winter when snowflakes were floating one by one from the air, and students could see the shapes perfectly on their snowflake catchers. We make these catchers by glueing black felt to cardboard, then letting snow fall onto them or sprinkling snow from the ground. Using magnifying glasses, the students have an up-close look at the six-sided, symmetrical snowflakes. It's great to see the joy on their faces as they watch each unique snowflake fall onto the felt!



**"I feel so grateful to be a part of the team as we share the *Nature in the City* program with students. Through these lessons, students have an opportunity to experience nature right in their schoolyards." – Anna**



## Animals in Motion

By Kat Resanovich, Environmental Educator & Volunteer Coordinator

"Animals in Motion" incorporates hands-on opportunities for students to engage with nature using their minds, bodies, and senses. Students use their sense of touch and knowledge of local wildlife to guess what animal parts (like a feather or fur) are in mystery bags. Many of the students are very nervous or cautious to reach into the mystery bags. However, by watching their classmates reach into the bags with the help of teachers and educators, those students reach into the bags and are excited to make their guesses and see what is in the next mystery bag. Getting to see each student's interpretation of how a fish swims, a frog hops, or a bird flies is also a lot of fun. The joy and excitement in each hop, slither, and wiggle is so fun to witness! I encourage students to keep an eye out for wildlife in their neighborhood and outside of their schools and love to hear how excited they are to keep exploring and looking in nature.



**"There is a huge inequality and inaccessibility to nature education and being a part of a program that helps create magical moments and exploration for students in my community means so much to me." – Kat**

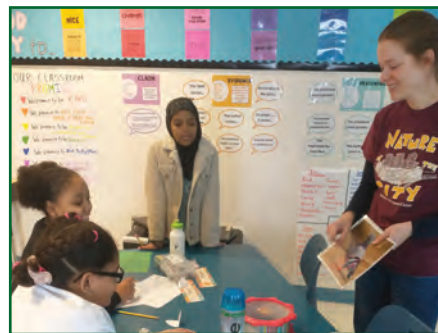




## Bright Ideas

By Kaylen Iorio, Environmental Educator

There was a wonderful 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and teacher at Frazer Elementary School with many English Language Learners (or ELL) students with different first languages. During the second lesson called “Bright Ideas,” I noticed a bit of struggle for students using the worksheets due to language barriers and was able to swap out an older (and more wordy) version with a newly updated worksheet that included more pictures and visuals. Immediately, students were able to match the pictures on their sheets with the equipment we brought for our experiment stations. Furrowed brows turned into smiles as students helped one another sound out words like “American Robin” and “Mourning Dove” as they listened to the different pitch of bird songs and explored sound wave energy. These students were able to enjoy a very fun experiment and learn all about energy transformations, and all it took was small but important tweaks to our worksheet!



**“We can often go through life oblivious to others’ experiences. When we stop and think about the barriers students face, especially language barriers, we can thoughtfully establish an inclusive environment for everyone to be able to learn (and have fun).” –Kaylen**



## Hot in Here

By Katie McLaughlin, Environmental Educator

In all *Nature in the City* lessons, we make connections to what students are learning about in their science curriculum. Learning about bigger concepts can be hard to have a hands-on experience, but we bring one in to show what atmospheres do for planets. We set up three banners to represent the atmospheres of Mars, Earth, and Venus that have holes to represent how thick the atmosphere is and how easily heat can escape the planet. Each student throws ping-pong balls to represent heat particles trying to escape. The students love doing this activity because it is like a carnival game, but we are also collecting data of what heat stays trapped by the atmosphere. We talk about the data afterwards and how each planet is different. We also show what happens as greenhouse gases increase on Earth and what could happen to our planet if this trend continues. The students quickly bring up ideas they know that can help, like wind power or being mindful of how we use our energy. Being aware of what could happen to our world in such a visual, hands-on way is so impactful because in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, these students are in their final year of *Nature in the City* lessons and we want them to continue to care about the world around them as they transition to middle school and beyond.



**“Even from the start of Kindergarten to the end, children become excited to see us return to their classrooms. We always bring fun, memorable, hands-on learning into the schools that excite and inspire exploration of the natural world just outside their schools and homes.” –Katie**



## Urban Ecosystems

By Lizzy Suzedell, Environmental Educator

For their last *Nature in the City* lesson, a group of 5<sup>th</sup> graders at Dr. Weeks Elementary School were exploring the ecosystem in their schoolyard. We found some big trees, cattails, isopods, lady bug larvae, chimney swifts, and many more creatures. The most special moment of the morning occurred when we were investigating the trees near the edge of the schoolyard. We heard something moving around in the leaves, and suddenly, there was a bright red cardinal about 10 feet away! The students didn’t know what kind of bird it was at the time, but they were amazed by its color and how it stood out against the leaves. It hopped around the branches and tweeted at us before flying out of sight. Some students then saw a more camouflaged female cardinal further back. We wondered what they might be up to - perhaps they were building a nest!



**“*Nature in the City* is an engaging and fun program that gets kids excited about science and nature in their very own community.” –Lizzy**

# Student Assessment Data

When we arrive at a classroom for a *Nature in the City* lesson, we introduce ourselves and ask students a few questions about what they are learning or have learned in science and to see what they remember from our previous visit. Here are just a few of the highlights from this year's data:

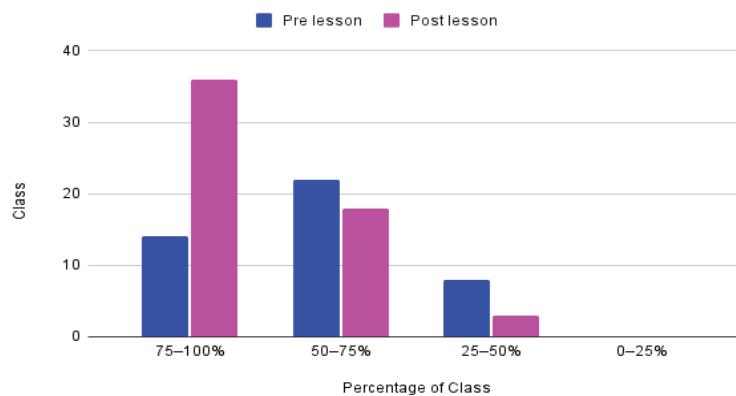
**What did K-5<sup>th</sup> grade students include in their memories of past lessons?**

**19%** of students referenced or defined a Core Concept.

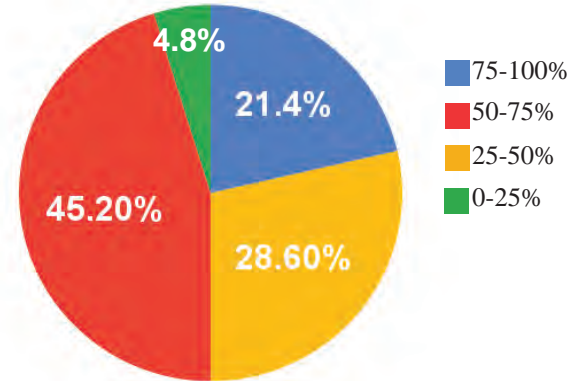
**20%** of students named a specific plant/animal example from a lesson.

**28%** of students recalled a direct experience, like going outside.

**33%** of students listed a main activity, like a maple syrup test.



*Second grade students were asked to give a thumbs up if they agreed that the shape of bird beaks could help them eat certain foods. After the lesson testing out different activities simulating how different birds catch their food (see photo at right), more students agreed!*



*Fifth grade is the last year of Nature in the City, and we asked students in each classroom to raise their hand if they are curious about the natural world. It is great that in 67% of assessed classrooms more than 50% of the students agreed! We hope that they continue to explore that curiosity as they move to middle school.*



## Students & Educators Explore "Ecosystem Jenga"

How do you take a challenging topic like the flow of energy through a food web and make it fun? Explore it through a hands-on game! The final *Nature in the City* lesson for 5<sup>th</sup> graders received an exciting new activity this year when educators created "Ecosystem Jenga." Students worked together in



groups to build a stable ecosystem using colorful blocks representing producers and consumers and then walked through three interactive stories about local ecosystems here in Syracuse where they followed prompts to add and subtract pieces. Amid the laughter as towers wobbled, student observed changes to their ecosystem: *Did the tower fall if too many pieces were removed? Could they restore stability, like when new plants grow in when a storm knocks down a large tree?*

After playing this hands-on game (which rapidly became a favorite of students, teachers, and even other adults in the classroom like PEACE

Incorporated's Foster Grandparent Mentors), students were ready to head outside and look for examples of real plants and animals that could be represented in the game and mapped out how they connect. One 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher from Syracuse Latin Pre-K-8 School shared in the survey that they "Loved the updates to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade program this year!" Another 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher from Dr. Weeks Elementary School said that "YOU MAKE LEARNING FUN!! THANK YOU."



*Games can make learning fun for all ages! From 5<sup>th</sup> graders across the SCSD to PEACE Inc.'s Foster Grandparent Program, the new Ecosystem Jenga was a huge hit this year!*



# Celebrating the 23<sup>rd</sup> Year of *Nature in the City*!



1<sup>st</sup> graders at Porter Elementary School play the pumpkin life cycle relay during Pumpkin Circle.

"My students enjoy learning about nature through all of the amazing hands-on activities [*Nature in the City*] provides them! The staff uses patience and knowledge to engage all of my class each time they come to our school!"  
- Kindergarten teacher, H.W. Smith Pre-K-8 School



4<sup>th</sup> graders at H.W. Smith Pre-K-8 School work together to decide which creatures live in each biome and present their diorama to the rest of the class!



3<sup>rd</sup> graders from Franklin Elementary School smile with a container of pond creatures during Creatures of the Deep.

"They love going outside to explore what was taught in the lesson."

-2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, Roberts Pre-K-8 School

"The students are able to foster a deeper understanding of grade level content through hands-on projects, real world experiences, and engaging learning activities in the classroom."

-1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, Delaware Primary School



2<sup>nd</sup> grade students at Dr. Weeks Elementary School excitedly share the seeds they found outside their school with Nature in the City educator Lizzy.



Kindergarten students at Meachem Elementary School loved meeting their surprise guest, an eastern box turtle, as they explored what makes something alive vs. not alive.



A 3<sup>rd</sup> grader from Porter Elementary School catches stream creatures at Elmwood Park to evaluate water quality.

"[My students are] making connections with real life experiences. It brings our classroom lessons to life!"

-1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, Syracuse Latin Pre-K-8 School

# Thank you to our partners and sponsors for making the 2024-2025 *Nature in the City* program possible!



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In 2023, the Baltimore Woods Nature in the City Program Fund was established at the Central New York Community Foundation to support the program in perpetuity thanks to an inaugural gift from the Estate of John Herman. Learn more at [cnycf.org](http://cnycf.org).

**We look forward to working with you for the 2025-2026 *Nature in the City* program!**



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